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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. LEAHY).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Merciful Father, for Your marvelous grace that enables us to live victoriously, we thank You. Thank You for strength during life's sunshine and shadows.

Lord, help us to express our gratitude by doing Your work in our world. Guide our lawmakers with Your higher wisdom, giving them the gift of reverential awe. Inspire them to surrender to Your will, replacing their fear with faith, their confusion with clarity, and their error with truth. Let love prevail over hate, justice triumph over greed, and harmony defeat discord.

We pray in Your Holy Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

The Senator from Maine.

Mr. KING. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. KING). Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session and resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Robert Luis Santos, of Texas, to be Director of the Census for the remainder of the term expiring December 31, 2021. (Reappointment)

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

JOHN R. LEWIS VOTING RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT ACT

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, the Senate today has the opportunity to live up to its best traditions. We can put our democracy over any political party.

Later today, we will take the first step that could put us on the path to having an open debate about the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. I have championed and sponsored this bill to restore the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965. I have done this for years.

Today, Senators of both parties have the chance to show they are willing to do the job we were elected to do—to debate and vote on legislation. And no legislation could be more foundational to our democracy than that which protects the right to vote.

We 100 Senators all have the right to vote. Let us exercise that right and not avoid voting on the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. This is such a fundamental part of our democracy. Let's set the example here, where all 100 Senators know we have the right to vote. Let's

make sure we vote and not avoid voting. I hope that we as a Senate will honor the rich bipartisan history around the Voting Rights Act in the name of our hero John Lewis, in the name of our democracy, and in the name of a foundational value that is the bedrock of our country.

Just yesterday, we announced a bipartisan compromise in the hopes of building support for the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. I am grateful to Senators MURKOWSKI and DURBIN and MANCHIN for their dedication to reaching this compromise. That bill, which we would seek to advance after proceeding to S. 4, will fully restore the Voting Rights Act, which is needed after two devastating decisions by the Supreme Court.

I have been clear that should the Senate eventually proceed to this bill, then I would welcome amendments to further strengthen and solidify this restoration of the Voting Rights Act, which, after all, has been bipartisan since the first enactment, usually passing the Senate unanimously, being signed into law by Presidents Reagan and Bush and others. But we should at least have that debate. Certainly, Senators should not avoid debating, and certainly Senators should not hide behind some procedural role so they don't have to vote one way or the other on the basic rights of Americans to vote.

So that is why we are here—to debate, vote on bills. There is simply no reason for any Senator to look at their constituents and say that this topic, that of protecting the right to vote, is just too political or too controversial—not the Voting Rights Act; not a voting rights bill that has a 56-year history of bipartisanship. No Senator should act as though they are afraid to vote one way or the other on this. Is that the message we want to convey to American voters eager to know what the Senate is doing to protect and strengthen our democracy? Ours is the

● This “bullet” symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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longest surviving democracy in history. The American people are watching and the world is watching what we do. Americans expect us to vote yes or no, not hide behind procedure.

Restoring and updating the Voting Rights Act on a bipartisan basis is how we have always done it. The core provisions of the Voting Rights Act have been reauthorized five times. Every time, there has been overwhelming bipartisan support, Republicans and Democrats alike.

Presidents Nixon, Reagan, and George W. Bush all signed Voting Rights Act reauthorizations into law. They touted the profound importance of this landmark law for our democracy. In fact, I remember—I was here—the most recent Voting Rights Act reauthorization in 2006 and the vote: 98 to 0. We still have Senators serving today, both Republicans and Democrats, who voted to support that legislation. The compromise bill I crafted with Senator MURKOWSKI follows the very same blueprint of these other bipartisan efforts to restore the Voting Rights Act.

I am aware of the toxic partisanship of American politics today, but I hope that is not going to obscure what has for decades united us as Americans and across party lines, and that is the belief that every one of us should have that protecting our right to vote—the very right that gives our democracy its name—is bigger than party or politics. It is the belief that a system of self-government—a government of, by, and for the people—is one that is worth preserving for generations to come. It is the belief that government exists to serve the will of the people, not the other way around.

So I hope that today we are going to rise above partisanship. Let's do what is right for our democracy. Let's not be afraid to vote. I hope we show Americans the Senate is still capable of being the conscience of the Nation and a unifying force during a divided time. I still believe we can be the Senate that acts together to maintain Americans'—our constituents'—constitutional right to vote.

When Senators come to the floor to cast their votes today, I hope they keep in mind the rich bipartisan history of the Voting Rights Act. I hope they decide to live up to that history. I hope they are also mindful of how history will remember us. Decades from now, when history tells the story of today's current threats to democracy, let it also tell the story of Senators who rose above the fray to protect the right that gives democracy its very name. Let all Senators vote so that all Americans can vote.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

BUILD BACK BETTER AGENDA

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, yesterday, Democrats continued making great progress toward finalizing President Biden's Build Back Better plan.

The challenges American families and workers are facing today are enormous, and President Biden's agenda is the remedy to much of their hardships. It is just what the American people want and what they need, and it is exactly why we need to focus on getting the job done to finalize and pass this legislation and deliver help for the American people.

Last night, I held another round of talks going past midnight with a number of my colleagues as we approach final agreement—talks with the White House, the Speaker, my Senate colleagues and chairs, and Members of the House. We continue to make very good progress each day. Passing such transformative legislation is not easy, but the long hours we are putting into it will be well worth it for the American people.

Over the last 24 hours, the hard work has yielded important new development. Yesterday, I announced the Democrats had reached an agreement to include provisions in Build Back Better that will lower prescription drug prices for seniors and for American families. This is a big deal.

For years, skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs have plagued millions of seniors and American families to the point that Americans spend far more on prescription drugs per capita than other wealthy nations. It is one of the largest out-of-pocket medical expenses that families have and it has gotten worse over the last few years.

For too many Americans, all it takes is a sudden serious illness and you can find yourself spending hundreds, if not thousands, and several thousands of dollars per year just to afford things like insulin or vitally needed cancer treatments. It is profoundly unfair and wholly un-American.

Imagine the strain you can face if someone—you or a loved one—is ill and you can't afford the medicine. You see them, their condition getting worse and worse. I can't think of things that are worse than that, though I guess there may be a few.

Yesterday, we took a large step forward in helping alleviate that problem. For the first time ever, Medicare will be empowered to directly negotiate prices in Part B and Part D. This will directly reduce out-of-pocket drug spending for millions of patients every time they visit a pharmacy or a doctor.

Our agreement does other things as well. It will cap out-of-pocket spending at \$2,000 per year, ending the dilemma I just spoke about, where a life-changing diagnosis could mean thousands upon thousands of dollars in new expenses that an individual can't afford.

This agreement will lower insulin prices so that Americans with diabetes don't pay more than \$35 per month for their insulin. Let me repeat that because it is amazing how the cost of insulin used to be so reasonable, then skyrocketed over the last few years with very little reasonable, justifiable explanation. This agreement will lower insulin prices so that Americans with diabetes don't pay more than \$35 per month for their insulin.

And it will reform the pharmaceutical industry to stop price gouging and make sure our country's drug pricing system benefits patients, not corporations.

It is not everything all of us wanted, but it is a major, major step in the right direction as we work to help the American people afford their better prescription drugs. We are going to keep working to make it even better, but this is a really good start and a major, major announcement.

I want to thank all my colleagues who had a hand in putting this agreement together: Senator WYDEN, Senator KLOBUCHAR, Senator MURPHY, Senator CORTEZ MASTO, Senator BENNET, and Senator KELLY. I also want to sincerely thank Senator SINEMA for working with us to reach this agreement.

We are going to build on this success as we continue making progress on the rest of Build Back Better. We are close. We are determined. We are confident that we will succeed in rewarding the trust that the American people have placed in us.

VOTING RIGHTS

Now on voting rights. Shortly before his death, the great John Lewis offered the American people a parting message: When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we call the Beloved Community.

The words of the great late John Lewis.

Well, today, the Senate is being called to take action because, across our beloved democracy, something indeed is not right. Something malicious is afoot. A lie—a terrible lie—spread by the former President of the United States is eating away corrosively at the foundation of our democracy, of our democratic heritage, like a disease.

This lie has led to the greatest coordinated effort at the State level to suppress voting rights since the era of segregation. In States like Georgia and Texas, Iowa and Florida and Arizona and many others, partisans have rewritten the rules of our elections in broad daylight, potentially making it harder for tens of millions of young, minority, low-income, disabled, and generally Democratic-leaning voters from participating in elections.

Today, the Senate will have a chance to respond to these attacks by voting to simply begin consideration—simply begin consideration—of the John Lewis